DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 993 CE 080 433

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TITLE	Informal Workplace Learning. Practice Application Brief No. 10.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0013
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ericacve.org/fulltext.asp.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Career Development; Career Planning; *Continuing Education; Education Work Relationship; Educational Planning; Employee Attitudes; *Employer Attitudes; *Employment Practices; *Informal Education; *On the Job Training; *Quality of Working Life; Work Environment

ABSTRACT

Research on informal learning in the workplace suggests several definitions, including that informal learning is a process of learning that takes place in everyday experience, often at subconscious levels, and that it is unique to, and rests in the hands of, the learner. Research supports introducing informal learning not as a replacement for formal activities but as a complement to them. A 2-year study of U.S. corporate cultures identified a "teaching firm" as one that "creates an environment in which teaching and learning are institutionally and culturally embedded in the organization." One of the most noteworthy findings of the study is support for estimates from previous studies that 70 percent of what people know about their jobs, they learn informally from the people with whom they work. Strategies for facilitating informal learning in the workplace include career development and planning and information exchanges such as meetings and study groups, as well as the use of workplace technology. (KC)

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ED 442 993

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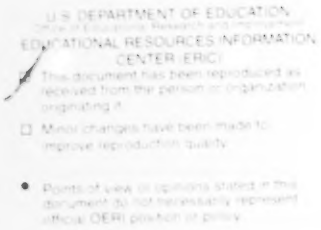
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PRACTICE APPLICATION 2000
BRIEF NO. 10

Informal Workplace Learning

In an era of ongoing change, workplace learning has taken on an increasingly popular role as a vehicle through which organizations can achieve not only their short-term goals, but also their long-term, strategic visions. Under the umbrella term of workplace learning, organizations can categorize their efforts as either formal or informal; the focus of this Brief is those categorized as informal. Although readers may have an intuitively clear picture of what informal learning may be, it is in fact a complex subject area. This *Brief* explores the meaning of the term informal learning as defined by several authors, reviews the results of research conducted by the Education Development Center (EDC) Inc., and describes the planning strategies and implications for practice offered by EDC and others.

What Is It, Exactly?

The term *informal learning* was first introduced in 1950 by Malcolm Knowles, in his pioneer work ***Informal Adult Education*** (Cseh, Marsick, and Watkins 1999). Since that time, many authors have written about informal learning, offering their unique perspective on the meaning of the term. However, for the purposes of this *Brief*, the focus is on informal learning in the workplace; for over a decade Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins have led the charge in this area of research. Rusaw (1995), referencing Marsick and Watkins, suggests that informal learning "is a process of learning that takes place in everyday experience, often at subconscious levels" (p. 218). Marsick and Watkins (1997) add that, not only is informal learning unique to the individual, but control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Informal learning, as defined by EDC, is that "in which the learning process is neither determined nor designed by the organization, regardless of the formality [or] informality of the goals and objectives toward which the learning is directed." (Stamps 1998, p. 32).

It is important to note that the research supports introducing informal learning not as a replacement for formal activities but as a complement to them. Bell (1977) uses a metaphor of brick and mortar to describe the relationship between formal and informal learning in an organization. He explains that formal learning acts as bricks fused into the emerging bridge of personal growth. Informal learning, he adds, serves as the mortar, facilitating the acceptance and development of formal learning, adding that it is this synergy that produces effective growth. In support of the earlier notion that informal learning should not replace formal learning activities, it was found that the two elements support one another (Bell and Dale 1999). In addition, research has found that reliance on informal learning alone has some drawbacks, including difficulty in accrediting or using it for formal qualifications, and informal learning "may be too narrowly based so the employee only learns part of a task or superficial skills which may not be transferable" (Bell and Dale 1999, n.p.).

What Does the Research Say?

In 1997, the Education Development Center, Inc. (a Newton, Massachusetts-based research organization) released findings from a 2-year study of corporate cultures within the United States (Dobbs 2000). Considered the most comprehensive look (to date) at how informal learning occurs in the workplace, the study was designed to identify the traits of what EDC calls a "teaching firm." (Stamps 1998). A teaching firm (as defined by EDC) "creates an environment in which teaching and learning are institutionally and culturally embedded in the organization" (ibid., p. 32). Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, state governments, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, the study included the following companies: Boeing Commercial Airplane Group, Siemens Power Transmission and Distribution, LLC, Reflexite North America, Data Instruments, Merry Mechanization, Inc., Ford Electronics, and Motorola (Day 1998).

One of the most noteworthy findings of the study is support for estimates from previous studies that "attempted to quantify formal training's contribution to overall job knowledge: 70 percent of what people know about their jobs, they learn informally from the people they work with." (Dobbs 2000, pp. 52, 54). Consistent with this claim, EDC researchers observing operations at Motorola "calculated that every hour of formal training yielded a four-hour spillover of informal learning" (Stamps 1998, p. 34). The EDC study suggests that "trainers can specify the learning process of employees through a concept called *taxonomies*," a matrix representing how and what employees learn, "and what contextual and direct factors effect informal learning" (Day 1998, p. 34). The four taxonomies of learning were condensed by content (e.g., practical skills, intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, and cultural awareness), and then broken down further to include content of learning, types of activities, and occasions of learning.

The final point worth noting from the EDC study is the opportunity to foster existing examples of informal learning in the workplace. An observation from Motorola serves to illustrate this point. During assembly line shift changes, shifts overlap by a half-hour or more. During the overlap, departing workers and supervisors would update the oncoming shift of any problems they had encountered. During this exchange, the employees may discuss probable causes and solutions (Stamps 1998). Bell (1977) recommends observing the interactions among co-workers. Do opportunities exist to increase the value of their informal exchange of information? Can resources be made available that would increase the richness of their dialogue? Once this assessment has been completed, Bell (1977) adds that barriers to learning be removed, humility be permitted, rewarding consequences for learning be provided, conditions that increase the probability that work-related informal learning will occur be purposefully created. This establishes the kind of organizational culture and context that is conducive to informal learning. The value of this type of diagnosis is immeasurable as it addresses the existing levels of informal learning and the opportunity for successful implementation of the following strategies.

Strategies for Facilitating Informal Learning in the Workplace

Career Development and Planning

Referencing the work of Mumford, Marsick and Watkins (1997) encourage the use of personal development plans. These plans are developed in concert with managers, their managers and/or staff, and an external learning facilitator. These plans emphasize natural learning, outside of the classroom, along with more structured courses or activities. Marsick and Watkins (1997) point out that informal learning can be planned, and overall learning is enhanced by planning, either before the fact or in retrospect to learn from past experience. This theme is echoed by Bell (1977), when he encourages taking advantage of the career development process to build in

planned opportunities for informal learning on behalf of the employee. This may include serving as a tutor for a trainee, taking responsibility for a staff meeting, or designing training as a member of a training steering committee (ibid.). In addition to these strategies, front-line supervisors and managers should encourage membership in related professional associations. Rusaw (1995) describes the opportunities for informal learning inherent in membership in professional associations. Professional associations serve as a place to identify a mentor; a mentoring relationship is often a great source of informal learning for both the protégé and mentor. In addition, the opportunity to serve in a position of leadership (i.e., an officer, chairperson, or task force leader) allows members to gain a perspective on management processes and practices by doing them (Rusaw 1995). Learning opportunities that extend beyond the barriers of an employee's job description may offer exposure to knowledge, skills, and abilities required for future assignments, and/or opportunity for promotion.

Information Exchanges

Rather generically named, a "structured learning exchange can encourage employees to share their intellectual wealth" (Marrelli 1998, p. 26). The structure and conditions surrounding these information exchanges are limitless. One option is to set aside time where people come together in for the purpose of exchanging information. These exchanges can be scheduled at a number of different times. They can exist as stand-alone sessions, designed solely for the purpose of exchanging information, or they can be adapted to staff meetings (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.). Bell (1977) offers an example of a stand-alone opportunity when describing the opportunity for cross-unit sharing. By conducting an hour and a half session first thing in the morning, one organization brought together employees from two separate units to learn more about each other. Coffee and donuts were served, and each group was given one half hour to present, leaving another 30 minutes for a "cocktail-party"-style discussion and networking (Bell 1977).

Bell also suggests reading and study groups as means for facilitating informal learning in the workplace. Brown bag discussions and book clubs are opportunities for informal learning, but they require planning. Employers can support these initiatives by providing meeting space, resources to purchase the books, and even food, if the discussions are held during the employees' lunch hour. The important point is that the time be scheduled and "honored," resisting the temptation to let more "urgent" matters result in the cancellation or reduction of time allotted for the exchange. Participation can be voluntary or managers, supervisors, and/or peers can nominate an employee. hatever the mechanism, it should be suitable and reliable. What kind of information should be exchanged? Marrelli (1998) offers the following list: software shortcuts, how to use new software, time management, how to handle difficult customers, information resources, preferred models for training evaluation, and benefits of belonging to a professional association. Employees may also consider a brief discussion and/or presentation on coursework recently completed through a company-sponsored tuition reimbursement program.

These are examples that might lend themselves to more traditional means of exchange (e.g., face-to-face). However, with the advancements in workplace technology, distance learning, and online communications, other media may be equally if not more effective (suitability and reliability relevant to the organization is a key factor). Other media through which this exchange of information can occur include but are not limited to intranet websites, chat rooms and/or discussion boards, e-mail listservs and/or mailing lists, and other vendor-supplied distance learning software and technology.

Summary

As evidenced by the findings of the Education Development Center's study, the formidable advantages of informal learning cannot be denied. But this is not to suggest that every corporation rush off to implement strategies for facilitating informal learning. Informal learning is merely one intervention that, with its known successes, may be the solution to an organization's problems. Consideration must be given to organizational context and culture. A combination of the right environment and mix of strategies (those discussed here and others) are a great foundation for an organization's workplace learning efforts.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. *Practice Application Briefs* may be freely reproduced and are available at <ericacve.org/fulltext.asp>.

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